

SOCIETY FOR LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

The Language of Instruction or the Instruction of Language?

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Reviving Official Language Debates in Morocco

One of the maxims I learned as a novice linguistic anthropologist was that language debates are never just about language, but more often about social and political flash points. My interlocutors in Morocco and Lebanon consistently evoked ideas about language in collaborative television viewing commentaries. Their critiques of a news announcer's Arabic or French mispronunciation, or how a politician used street slang in parliament were not just evaluations about slips of the tongue, or the appropriateness of language use in a specific technological medium; they were discussions about morality, national identity, and neo-imperialism.

I encountered this again when I began following (from the US) a Moroccan media firestorm surrounding a conference held in October 2013 to discuss a proposal for educational reform in Morocco. Citing a widely circulated statistic that only 6 out of 100 public school children graduate from university in Morocco, a group headed by prominent advertising businessman and philanthropist Nouredine Ayouch proposed several policy changes. Ayouch's group called for the language of public education to be changed from Modern Standard Arabic (MSA—shared as the language of instruction across the Arabic-speaking world) to "mother tongue" languages (either Moroccan Arabic or one of the Amazigh varieties) in pre-school and the first two years of primary school. A key assumption in their proposal was that MSA and Moroccan Arabic are different languages rather than varieties on an Arabic linguistic continuum. They suggested that children struggled and dropped out of school because they were taught in a language they didn't speak at home (MSA), and that the cognitive disconnect between the language of instruction and student's "mother tongue" impeded their development of critical reasoning and other skills central to future employment.

This debate over the language of educational instruction is not a new one (recurring during the colonial and post-colonial eras) and Ayouch's conference passed with little press notice until he circulated the proceedings in November. At that point, the quasi-national television station 2M dedicated a political talk show to the subject of changing the language of instruction to Moroccan Arabic and invited Ayouch to represent his group's proposal and historian Abdallah Laroui to defend the use of MSA.

The public response to the television program was immediate. In addition to news summaries of the event, people posted individual video responses, wrote op-eds to newspapers, and interviewed intellectuals and people on the street. Many of these clips featured on YouTube and circulated as links on other websites. In the myriad online entextualizations I followed, there was clearly some support for incorporating "mother tongue" languages into educational instruction, but most of the responses were critical. Some Amazigh activists felt this would further distract from their revitalizing projects. Others objected that Ayouch's proposal would be a waste of public funds. Many disputed how the government would decide which Moroccan dialect to standardize, and how teachers would implement it. Some questioned whether Moroccan Arabic and Amazigh languages were not already being used to facilitate communication during the first years of schooling. Some asked why factors such as poverty and poor teacher training were not included in this specific discussion about the high drop-out rates. Several people wondered why they should learn a language that affords them no edge on the global market. Yet another group noted that all this talk about Arabic ignored the dominance of French among elites and aspiring classes whose children's private education and family life is mostly in French. Overlapping this critique was a neo-colonial French dominance argument: to promote mother tongue instruction in schools was to further weaken Morocco through linguistic division tactics and create a pool of manual laborers who were barely literate but largely uneducated.

Each response carried with it a fascinating spatial and temporal envelope, a clue to the critics' interpretive orientation (what Bakhtin called a chronotope). Several people expressed concern over the *future* economic possibilities of Moroccans if they did not acquire languages with a *global* reach: French, English, MSA, Mandarin Chinese. The claim of French linguistic imperialism embedded both a backward nod to Morocco's colonial *past*, a grounding of elite collaboration with French political economic interests in the *present*, as well as a prediction of *future* French dominance if "mother tongues" became the language of educational instruction. Supporters of MSA instruction cited the *centuries* of scientific and cultural history *across* the Muslim and Arab *worlds* that speakers inherited with acquiring the language. Promoters of "mother tongue" instruction countered with evidence of how *initial affective closeness* would facilitate *future* cognitive development.

It would be tempting to map these orientations onto named Moroccan political groups vying for reform: the secularists with their gaze toward an inevitable *future* vs. the Islamists with their attachment to a glorious *past*. However, I believe such dichotomies miss the ways in which so-called Islamists warn of a *future* Euro-linguistic/economic/educational imperialism, or that so-called secularists call for political/linguistic pluralism in French and MSA based on Morocco's literary and cultural *history*. These chronotopic erasures hide the fact that Moroccans of all educational stripes can communicate across political (and linguistic) divides despite the educational system's supposed failures. Moreover, this dichotomous framing further propagates the assumption that individual formal literacy in any language is a necessary condition for public political and economic *futures*. As I argue in my forthcoming ethnography, mobilizing graduation statistics to argue for linguistic and cognitive reform of the Moroccan educational system belies the distributed and collective nature of linguistic resource use in Moroccan homes and businesses: people pool their literacy skills in various genres and domains to accomplish all kinds of cognitive, administrative, political and economic tasks.

Yet again, language debates were not about language, but proxies for political economy and identity contentions. Moroccans mobilized these spacetime frames to indicate how imagined audiences should understand their claims for linguistic reform as bundled with national identity, pragmatic economics, transnational sovereignty, and moral politics—and not in neat political dichotomies.

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